

## BOOK REVIEWS

for another time. This was Nishitani's gift, as Hase Shōtō reminds us: to inherit all the riches Buddhism has to offer in the search for wisdom.<sup>2</sup>

Lacking the credentials of a native speaker, I hesitate to comment on the quality of the English translation, though I must say I find it reminiscent of Nishitani's engaging, narrative style. At the same time, I was struck occasionally by what seemed to me unnecessary forfeitures of nuance due to a limited English vocabulary. For example, where the English has "the study of dogma" (p. 28) in contrast with a participation in ritual, the Japanese has *kyōgaku*, which is closer to religious instruction or catechism than it is to an academic specialization or churchly self-righteous authority. Laying the original and the translation side by side, one notices numerous places where this largely literal translation limps along syntactically, landing itself time and again in unnatural and inaccurate expressions. This is clear already from the titles of the essays and the handful of passages cited earlier in this review. And then, there are the errors in romanization and diacritical marks. Still, through it all, the creative, even playful, mind that made Nishitani one of the philosophers most beloved by modern Japanese Buddhist scholars shines bright and unclouded by the shift from one culture and language to another.

*Ethics and Society in Contemporary Shin Buddhism*. By Ugo Dessì. Berlin: Lit Verlag, 2007. 272 pages. Paperback €39.90.

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This is the first book-length account of contemporary Shin Buddhist ethics in English. It describes the ethical thought of numerous modern scholars of the Shin school (mainly from the Ōtani-ha and Honganji-ha), as well as the activities of contemporary activists who struggle against war and discrimination, and for peace and social welfare. It is a unique mixture of textual analysis with primary data gathered through fieldwork and participant observation. Until the publication of Dessì's study, most scholarship on Shin ethics in English con-

<sup>2</sup> See Hase Shōtō 長谷正當, "Kū to jōdo: Do ni okeru chōetsu" 空と浄土: 土における超越. In *Yokubō no tetsugaku: Jōdokyō sekai no shisaku* 欲望の哲学: 浄土教世界の思索. Kyoto: Hōzōkan, 2003.

sisted of essays (some of these translated from Japanese).<sup>3</sup> Dessì adds to this previous scholarship by introducing the depth and breadth of works on Shin ethics in Japanese.

Over one hundred years of Japanese Shin scholarship in modern universities has produced a remarkable wealth of texts, and many of these are relevant to ethics. The mass of doctrinal works and commentaries in which ethics are occasionally embedded, and the large amount of recent material devoted specifically to metaethics, normative ethics, or applied ethical issues, make it impossible for Dessì to cover all of modern Shin ethics in a single book. He focuses instead on selected themes and issues. He begins with a short overview of Shin ethics (p. 38ff.), followed by an examination of five themes that recur in ethical arguments (p. 79ff.), and ends with a discussion of Shin activism in the following areas: peace and nonviolence (the Yasukuni shrine issue), human rights and discrimination (the *buraku* issue and Hansen's disease), and Shin Buddhist contributions to social welfare (the Vihāra movement) (p. 141ff.).

Chapter 1 opens with an introduction of events from the tumultuous Japanese Buddhist world of the 1960s and 1970s. This period provoked examination of Japanese ethics and philosophy by Western scholars mainly from the perspective of the Zen school. Briefly mentioning reasons for the curious lack of study of the Shin school (see especially Galen Amstutz, *Interpreting Amida: History and Orientalism in the Study of Pure Land Buddhism*, Albany: State University of New York Press, 1997), Dessì seeks to address this lack by describing and analyzing Shin ethics, and by describing the response of Shin institutions to modern ethical issues (p. 13). He summarizes, extremely briefly, important ideas from the three Pure Land sutras, the seven Shin patriarchs (pp. 24–28), Shinran (pp. 28–34), and Rennyo (p. 35). He then examines ideas important in Shin ethics, such as the ten benefits of *shinjin*, relying most heavily on the doctrinal treatises and letters of Shinran (pp. 38–78). He refers

<sup>3</sup> Authors who have begun to explore this topic include Ama Toshimaro, Galen Amstutz and Stephen J. Lewis, Angela Andrade, Arai Toshikazu, Asai Jōkai, Robert Bellah, Alfred Bloom, Mark L. Blum, James Dobbins, Friedrich Fenzl, Futaba Kenkō, Hirose Takashi, Ichiraku Makoto, Thomas P. Kasulis, Kiyozawa Manshi, Ishida Mitsuyuki, Nabeshima Naoki, Ronald Nakasone, Michael Pye, Fabio Rambelli, Gerhard Schepers, Shigaraki Takamaro, Soga Ryōjin, Takagi Kenmyō, Tamamitsu Junshō, Tanabe Hajime, Kenneth Tanaka, Terakawa Shunshō, Tokunaga Michio, Ueda Yoshifumi, Mark Unno, Taitetsu Unno, Jan Van Bragt, Yasutomi Shin'ya, John S. Yokota, as well as authors appearing in the collections *Engaged Pure Land Buddhism* (Wisdom Ocean, 1998) and *Living in Amida's Universal Vow* (World Wisdom, 2004).

occasionally to Rennyō, Kakunyo, and Zonkaku for their views on political authority, *kami* worship, rites, and apotropaic practices, as well as their attitudes towards Confucianism and Daoist values, particularly filial piety. And lastly, he summarizes twentieth-century contributions to ethical thought in the works of Kiyozawa Manshi (1863–1903), Takagi Kenmyō (1864–1914), Soga Ryōjin (1875–1971), Kaneko Daiei (1881–1976), and Yasuda Rijin (1900–1982) from the Ōtani-ha, as well as introducing the contributions of Suzuki Daisetsu (1870–1966) and the Kyoto-school philosophers.

Any treatment of Shin ethics must proceed with the caveat that ethical action is not soteriological. To put it in other words, action is not instrumentally related to salvation. This disjunction between salvation and action in Shin has eroded the significance of the precepts and miscellaneous good acts recognized by other schools of Buddhism, and occasionally given rise to antinomian interpretations and behaviors—precisely because neither bad nor good action affects one's salvation. Despite this caveat, Dessì and the authors he summarizes assert that there is no disjunction in the other direction; Shin soteriology does influence ethics and moral behavior. And one of the most valuable contributions of this work is its clarification of the remarkable variety of Shin concepts and practices which are thought to impact action, character, awareness, and decision-making. Some of these include: the forty-eight vows of Amida during his bodhisattva stage, especially the first four and the eighteenth; the Mahayana bodhisattva practice of Amida, including the perfections, precepts, and good paths of action; transfer of merit (*ekō*) and karma (*gō*); gratitude (*hō'on*); nenbutsu praxis and naturalness (*jinen*), leading to the desire to do good and avoid evil; as well as the change of heart in those who have done evil, and the slow cultivation of deep warmth, forbearance, and gentleness as signs of rejecting the world (*yo o itou*).

In Chapter 2—the longest in the book—Dessì introduces modern and contemporary academic works on Shin ethics. His references stretch back to the Meiji-period scholar, Kiyozawa, and move forward in time to include academics currently active, many employed at the Shin-affiliated Otani and Ryukoku Universities. There is a slight preponderance of contemporary Honganji-ha authors and of early twentieth-century Ōtani-ha authors, yet Dessì is able to introduce important works associated with both branches. The chapter is organized into five themes: birth in the Pure Land, *shinjin*, equality, criticism, and humanism. In the first (p. 83ff.), he presents authors who argue that birth in the Pure Land (*ōjō*) is immediate and that the Pure Land (*jōdo*) itself is immanent, rather than postponed until after death. Birth as an event in this life, and the

Pure Land as immanent in this world, make the particular qualities of birth (a transformation of the practitioner) and of the Pure Land (its adornments and structure) available to arguments about how the present world ought to be (pp. 91–92). In the second, he presents interpretations of *shinjin* as an event occurring—and sometimes constantly recurring—in the lives of individual foolish beings. Then, he explores the implications of this soteriological attainment for behavior and character in this life in the arguments of modern Shin Buddhists (pp. 104–5). In the third, he looks at the various ways that soteriological equality is translated into social equality by Shin authors. Arguments for social equality are made variously from positions on karma, fellowship (*dōbō*), and sympathy with the oppressed. In the fourth, he examines arguments that Shin religious realization provides a standpoint from which to be morally critical of the world and its power structures, a place to be keenly aware of the world’s evils. Some authors argue that the nenbutsu persecutions during and after the time of Shinran prove that the critical standpoint created by Shin realization actually threatened, and ought to continue to threaten, power structures. Dessì describes additional arguments that a critical Shin standpoint encourages both resistance to oppression and emancipation from discrimination in this world (pp. 116–17). In the fifth section, he presents the tendency in Shin scholarly and institutional texts to argue that society’s ills are caused by humanism and anthropocentrism—“reductively understood as a subject-centered way of thinking exclusively concerned with the welfare of human beings” (pp. 131–32). Authors argue that Shin Buddhist ethical and soteriological praxis can address the problems caused by this humanism, such as environmental degradation, war, and so on.

In Chapter 3 (pp. 141–90), Dessì describes the kinds of groups active in addressing social issues. He begins with the Yasukuni shrine issue, with its attendant considerations of war memory, pacifism, and separation of religion and state. Next, he investigates two kinds of discrimination, directed towards the *hisabetsu burakumin* and sufferers of Hansen’s disease (considered a neutral term for the disease leprosy in Japanese). Dessì concludes with a discussion of the extensive volunteer involvement in the Vihāra Buddhist hospice movement as an outgrowth of twentieth-century Buddhist social welfare practices. He examines both grassroots groups and those within the institutional hierarchies of the Honganji-ha and Ōtani-ha. He has collected data from grassroots activists with small-scale surveys, endeavoring to test the relationship between Shin doctrine and Shin activism. His evaluation of the effect of both kinds of groups (informal/grassroots and formal/sectarian) is positive—despite his conclusion

that both the degree to which activists are inspired by Shin teachings, and the level of articulation of those teachings in activist publications, are low. For each of the four issues, he provides a brief history followed by a description of current activities, publications, and positions—including official apologies and protests issued by sectarian administrations and intersectorian associations.

Although this work is mainly descriptive, Dessi makes several interesting analytical contributions. He notes that ethics are not crucial for some Shin authors, while absolutely essential for others. This is an observation that religious ethicists rarely make. He observes that it is possible to identify a continuum, “encompassing a wide spectrum of graded approaches to ethics,” ranging from Shin concepts treated as purely internal, to those same concepts treated as encompassing guides for action and character cultivation (p. 13). Dessi’s discussion, of course, stresses those interpretations that make concepts relevant and available for ethical argument. Thus, his work can be seen as a gathering of interpretations where key Shin ideas are made relevant to relationships between people, to the present time, and to this world. For example, Dessi discusses interpretations of soteriological equality (Amida saves all sentient beings without distinction) that imply social equality (p. 38), of Shinran’s identification with marginalized classes that imply sympathy and concrete social action (p. 43), and of Shinran’s admonishing the rulers in the postscript to the *Kyōgyōshinshō* that imply a critical anti-authoritarianism. Throughout, Dessi acknowledges that there are different interpretations and different levels of importance assigned to ethics by Shin Buddhists.

Another interesting thread that Dessi highlights is found in arguments against antinomianism in Shin. In particular, he develops distinctions between Shinran’s doctrinal treatises and his letters. While the former can suggest a radical, antinomian equality and the non-instrumentality of good actions, the advice of the latter speaks against the performance of evil acts, and against association with evil doers (p. 43). Dessi leaves the reader with a sense of how complex the relationship can be, even for a single author, between the implications of abstract ideas and actual recommendations for practice. This relationship is further explored in Dessi’s comparison of ethical arguments in Shin texts with the positions and practices of Shin groups garnered through fieldwork. This comparison allows him to “test” whether or not abstract ethical positions derived from scripture are related to positions actually recommended by Shin groups.

Moreover, he takes into account individual and collective aspects of ethics in addition to act-, rule-, and principle-centered aspects (for example, con-

demning the act of killing or a principle of anti-authoritarianism). With respect to the individual, he notes descriptions of ethical change in the individual over time through nenbutsu practice and through the soteriological realization of *shinjin*. For collective aspects, he presents the views of authors, such as Soga and Yasuda, who argue for the ethical meaning of the Shin institution as a whole—the community of nenbutsu practitioners in history. In these accounts, the religious institution is the ethical manifestation of Amida's Vow, of the Pure Land, and ought to have certain characteristics such as “togetherness” (*warera*) and “fellowship” (*dōbō*).

Making his discussion relevant to other topics in religious studies, Dessì connects his discussion of Shin ethics with the study of Japanese Buddhism and the sociology of religion. In the study of Japanese Buddhism, Critical Buddhism, or Buddhism as criticism, has stimulated a good deal of scholarly debate (See Jamie Hubbard and Paul L. Swanson, eds., *Pruning the Bodhi Tree: The Storm over Critical Buddhism*, University of Hawai'i Press, 1997). Dessì describes how Shin authors have also developed understandings of Shin doctrine as criticism that have important implications for contemporary Shin ethical theory (pp. 111–31). Specifically, Dessì introduces authors who argue that Shin provides a standpoint of moral critique, a place from which the good and evil in the world become clear. He implies, however, that this critical standpoint does not participate in that good and evil. That is, the standpoint is not itself normative or prescriptive. Indeed, Dessì describes how this critical standpoint tries to achieve two difficult goals: (1) to withhold Shin doctrine, practice, and institutions from an exclusive tie to any particular normative ideology (such as early twentieth-century Japanese militarism); and (2) to make the broadest possible range of Shin doctrines, practices, and institutions available and relevant to ethical action in the world. Shin Buddhism as criticism attempts to resist an exclusive normativity while encouraging ethical behavior. And much like Critical Buddhism, it asserts that interpretations of Shin that make its thought ethically irrelevant are themselves unethical and cause immoral behavior. It is thought that when Shin Buddhists are unable to use Shin doctrine to formulate ethical positions this fosters the support of immoral or morally negligent ideologies and political regimes.

Dessì contributes to the sociology of religion with a unique analysis of current Shin ethical arguments and activism as typical of religious responses to globalization, as described by Peter Berger (pp. 191–92). Utilizing Berger's typology, Dessì identifies both conservative and liberal responses within Shin ethical arguments, which allows him to present a range of ethical positions

present in the tradition, as well as demonstrate how ethical arguments are a part of broader historical currents.

In the end, I have two minor points to make regarding Dessì's work. The first is related to the constant refrain that "Shin Buddhism" resists normative ethics and avoids prescriptive statements. For example, Dessì states that the limitation imposed by the doctrine of Other Power (*tariki*) salvation (the disjunction between ethical behavior and soteriology discussed above) "has rendered difficult the use of normative language to connect the dimension of other-power to the everyday social practice of the believers" (p. 79). Elsewhere, he states that Shin is reluctant to formulate a code or make prescriptive statements. Certainly, Dessì is not the only one to say that Shin is wary of normative ethics. Some of the authors he examines characterize Shin in this way and strongly resist any exclusive link to a particular normative ideology. My concern is what this characterization of Shin as resistant to normativity means when placed alongside the clearly normative material that Dessì summarizes from other modern authors, from history and text, and from his observations of activists, administrative groups, and institutions. In the midst of all this ethical material, how should we understand frequent statements that Shin has "difficulty" formulating an ethic, is "reluctant" to make normative statements, or the surprise that many Shin Buddhists have high standards and expectations for moral behavior? Dessì has already indicated that there is a range of ethical positions taken by Shin Buddhists, and perhaps the anti-ethical is merely one among many. This is a difficult problem and one that I hope Dessì will take up in future studies.

The second point concerns Dessì's summary of Shin ethics (pp. 38–62). There are several possible ways, for example, to present Shinran's ethical thought. One is to describe the significance and context of Shinran's ethics at the time when he lived. Another is to describe his ethics with reference to the contemporary context and its issues. I believe that Dessì's presentation of Shinran's ethics tends to favor the latter—a natural consequence of his careful study of authors interested in pacifism, democracy, social welfare, the impact of the West, human rights and discrimination, pluralism and other religious traditions, criticism, and so forth. Thus, Dessì's summary of Shin ethics at the start of the book should be read with the qualification that it has emerged from consideration of contemporary issues. As such, the concepts and contradictions which he presents in Shinran's writings are precisely those important to modern arguments and not necessarily inclusive of those important in other historical periods.



This work is packed with information. It is an extremely useful contribution to the study of Buddhist ethics, and highly recommended for anyone seeking to become familiar with the contemporary activities of the Ōtani-ha and Honganji-ha. It introduces and summarizes the ethical views of contemporary Shin authors, including many whose ideas have appeared only in Japanese. Moreover, Dessì is able to present the multifaceted nature of Shin ethical thought, comprising the cultivation of virtue, criticism as ethics, action-guides, moral attitudes and sentiments, and principles put forward by Shin institutions. I look forward to Dessì's future work on Shin ethics, and hope that he will expand upon topics which he was only able to touch on briefly in this book, such as the relationship between Shin and Confucian ethics, views on secular political authority and social structure, and differences in prescriptive content depending on the type of religious text, whether letter or doctrinal treatise.